



Citizens
Coalition for
Equal Access



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My name is Ruth Grobe, and I am Secretary of The Citizens Coalition For Equal Access, a grass roots disability rights organization, and Chair of the Farmington Human Relations Commission. I am writing in favor of HB 5353, AN ACT REQUIRING STATE BUILDINGS TO BE ACCESSIBLE TO PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES, and I include a background paper that describes the large and pressing issues that have a bearing on this bill.

In working with Farmington town government and experiencing the daily travails of people with disabilities, I now realize how ignorant I was previously and how little the vast majority of abled people understand about disability issues, including many of the officials in charge of carrying out ADA requirements.

I have had the good fortune to be a person of privilege all my life, attending private school, Harvard University, and the University of Connecticut for my Masters Degree in Social Work. I have also spent my whole life advocating for the rights of minority groups, but I came late to the issue of disability rights. I have to say that in the past few years of concentrating on this issue, I HAVE NEVER EXPERIENCED PRIVILEGE MORE ACUTELY THAN I NOW EXPERIENCE IT AS AN ABLED PERSON IN AMERICA.

Over the past eight years, I have seen that people with disabilities are routinely discriminated against; their needs are overlooked; and their issues are a low priority in good economic times as well as bad. If you have some sort of physical impairment and especially if you use a wheelchair, every foray into the built environment bears a measure of uncertainty or even danger because of inadequate infrastructure, maintenance, and understanding of the needs of people with disabilities.

Opponents of accessibility accommodations often say that a lot of money is spent on an accommodation, only to have it go unused. I dispute the accuracy of this claim across the board, but in any case, it is a chicken and egg situation. One of the reasons that people with disabilities don't use accommodations is that there is no predictability as to what will be in good shape and what won't. A case in point is the State office building at 79 Elm Street. In response to advocacy by Ray Elling, one of the members of CC=A, the State recently installed an automatic door opening system at 79 Elm; however, the system was installed on only the *exterior* set of doors, not



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on the interior ones, even though the additional cost would have been minimal. Multiplied ad infinitum, it is this kind of unpredictability that ultimately discourages and suppresses participation by people with disabilities.

For all of the above reasons, I most earnestly urge you to support H.B. 5353, an effort that is long overdue and that needs to be coordinated with the ADA Self-Evaluations presently being conducted by the Department of Administrative Services. We would ask your Committee to work with Commissioner DeFronzo to ensure two outcomes:

1. That the State ADA Self-Evaluations and Transition Plans result in concrete accessibility upgrades that have been well vetted by people who are actually disabled
2. That the upgrades include buildings used by the judicial and legislative branches in addition to those used by the executive branch.

Since the original version of the ADA was passed in 1990, we have not done a good job of realizing its promise of equality for all citizens with disabilities. As our population ages and more and more people are faced with physical impairments, the issue becomes all the more pressing. This time around, we need to get it right. Please read the Citizens Coalition background paper, and please make every effort to learn more about the daily struggle of people with disabilities and the societal accommodations that could transform the struggle into triumph.